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Book Group Kit Enrichment Materials

Olive Kitteridge, by Elizabeth Strout

Winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

<http://elizabethstrout.com/>



From the author's website:

Elizabeth Strout was born in Portland, Maine, and grew up in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire. From a young age she was drawn to writing things down, keeping notebooks that recorded the quotidian details of her days. She was also drawn to books, and spent hours of her youth in the local library lingering among the stacks of fiction. During the summer months of her childhood she played outdoors, either with her brother, or, more often, alone, and this is where she developed her deep and abiding love of the physical world: the seaweed covered rocks along the coast of Maine, and the woods of New Hampshire with its hidden wildflowers.

During her adolescent years, Strout continued writing avidly, having conceived of herself as a writer from early on. She read biographies of writers, and was already studying – on her own – the way American writers, in particular, told their stories. Poetry was something she read and memorized; by the age of sixteen was sending out stories to magazines. Her first story was published when she was twenty-six.

Strout attended Bates College, graduating with a degree in English in 1977. Two years later, she went to Syracuse University College of Law, where she received a law degree along with a Certificate in Gerontology. She worked briefly for Legal Services, before moving to New York City, where she became an adjunct in the English Department of Borough of Manhattan Community College. By this time she was publishing more stories in literary magazines and Redbook and Seventeen. Juggling the needs that came with raising a family and her teaching schedule, she found a few hours each day to work on her writing.

In 1998, ***Amy and Isabelle*** was published to much critical acclaim. The novel had taken almost seven years to write, and only her family and close friends knew she was working on it. Six years later she published ***Abide With Me***, and three years after that, ***Olive Kitteridge***. While her life as a writer has increasingly become a more public one, she remains as devoted to the crafting of honest fiction as she was when she was sixteen years old, sending out her first stories.

Having lived in New York for almost half her life, she continues to thrill at the crowded sidewalks and the subways and the small corner delis. "It's simple," she has said. "For me – there is nothing more interesting than life."

Discussion Questions

1. Do you like Olive Kitteridge as a person?
2. Have you ever met anyone like Olive Kitteridge, and if so, what similarities do you see between that person and Olive?
3. How would you say Olive changed as a person during the course of the book?
4. Discuss the theme of suicide. Which characters are most affected (or fascinated) by the idea of killing themselves?
5. What freedoms do the residents of Crosby, Maine, experience in contrast with those who see the town for bigger "ponds" (California, New York)? Does anyone feel trapped in Crosby, and if so, who? What outlets for escape are available to them?
6. Why does Henry tolerate Olive as much as he does, catering to her, agreeing with her, staying even-keeled when she rants and raves? Is there anyone that you tolerate despite their sometimes overbearing behavior? If so, why?
7. How does Kevin (in "Incoming Tide") typify a child craving his father's approval? Are his behaviors and mannerisms any way like those of Christopher Kitteridge? Do you think Olive reminds Kevin more of his mother or of his father?
8. In "A Little Burst," why do you think Olive is so keen on having a positive relationship with Suzanne, whom she obviously dislikes? How is this a reflection of how she treats other people in town?
9. Does it seem fitting to you that Olive would not respond while others ridiculed her body and her choice of clothing at Christopher and Suzanne's wedding?
10. How do you think Olive perceives boundaries and possessiveness, especially in regard to relationships?
11. Elizabeth Strout writes, "The appetites of the body were private battles" ("Starving," page 89). In what ways is this true? Are there "appetites" that could be described as battles waged in

public? Which ones, and why?

12. Why does Nina elicit such a strong reaction from Olive in “Starving”? What does Olive notice that moves her to tears in public? Why did witnessing this scene turn Harmon away from Bonnie?

13. In “A Different Road,” Strout writes about Olive and Henry: “No, they would never get over that night because they had said things that altered how they saw each other” (p. 124). What is it that Olive and Henry say to each other while being held hostage in the hospital bathroom that has this effect? Have you experienced a moment like this in one of your close relationships?

14. In “Tulips” and in “Basket of Trips,” Olive visits people in difficult circumstances (Henry in the convalescent home, and Marlene Bonney at her husband’s funeral) in hopes that “in the presence of someone else’s sorrow, a tiny crack of light would somehow come through her own dark encasement” (p. 172). In what ways do the tragedies of others shine light on Olive’s trials with Christopher’s departure and Henry’s illness? How do those experiences change Olive’s interactions with others? Is she more compassionate or more indifferent? Is she more approachable or more guarded? Is she more hopeful or more pessimistic?

15. In “Ship in a Bottle,” Julie is jilted by her fiancé, Bruce, on her wedding day. Julie’s mother, Anita, furious at Bruce’s betrayal, shoots at him soon after. Julie quotes Olive Kitteridge as having told her seventh-grade class, “Don’t be scared of your hunger. If you’re scared of your hunger, you’ll just be one more ninny like everyone else” (p. 195). What do you think Olive means by this phrase? How does Olive’s life reflect this idea? Who is afraid of his or her hunger in these stories?

16. In “Security,” do you get the impression that Olive likes Ann, Christopher’s new wife? Why does she excuse Ann’s smoking and drinking while pregnant with Christopher’s first child (and Henry’s first grandchild)? Why does she seem so accepting initially, and what makes her less so as the story goes on?

17. Was Christopher justified in his fight with Olive in “Security”? Did he kick her out, or did she voluntarily leave? Do you think he and Ann are cruel to Olive?

18. Do you think Olive is really oblivious to how others see her— especially Christopher? Do you think she found Christopher’s accusations in “Security” shocking or just unexpected?

19. What’s happened to Rebecca at the end of “Criminal”? Where do you think she goes, and why do you think she feels compelled to go? Do you think she’s satisfied with her life with David? What do you think are the reasons she can’t hold down a job?

20. What elements of Olive’s personality are revealed in her relationship with Jack Kennison in “River”? How does their interaction reflect changes in her perspective on her son? On the way she treated Henry? On the way she sees the world?

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_o/olive_kitteridge1.asp#discuss

Suggested Readalikes:

Joann Robin's *Woman Made of Sand*, which details the life of a husband and wife and their children through interconnected stories

Melissa Bank's novel made of up interrelated stories showing one woman's path to independence, *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*

The Corrections, by Jonathan Franzen, which recounts a dysfunctional family struggling to have one last Christmas together

Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson, another novel in stories
any book of stories by Alice Munro

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

A Guide to the Birds of East Africa by Nicholas Drayson

The Red Garden by Alice Hoffman

For My Daughters by Barbara Delinsky

The Stone Diaries, by Carol Shields